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NSC BRIEFING

8 January 1954

INDOCHINA

I. French command in Indochina becoming apprehensive over large enemy buildup around Dien Bien Phu in northeast Tonkin.

A. Navarre had initially hoped for an enemy attack on this strongpoint as presenting opportunity to inflict costly defeat.

B. But enemy troops in the area and apparently en route (equivalent of over 3 divisions) now more than double the French garrison of 12 battalions.

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C. French estimate VM will be  
ready to attack soon after  
15 January.

1. French maintain  
superiority of fire  
power but mountainous  
terrain enables Viet  
Minh to bring its  
artillery to bear  
without exposing it-  
self to counterbattery  
fire.

2. The Crachin, an annual  
period of low ceilings,  
fog and drizzle which  
arrives in mid-January  
will hamper air  
operations.

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3. French worried  
additionally by reports  
of 37mm antiaircraft  
pieces near Dien Bien  
Phu which they fear may  
prove effective against  
the transport planes,  
which are their only  
means of supply.

II. Loss of strongly reinforced Dien Bien  
Phu would have a devastating effect on  
French prestige in Indochina and possi-  
bly on French-Vietnamese troop morale.

A. Elimination of the garrison  
would more than offset the  
reinforcements totaling 9  
battalions that Navarre has  
obtained from France and  
North Africa.

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B. Little doubt that Viet Minh  
could take the French strong-  
point if willing to pay the  
cost.

III. Plenty of indications that Viet Minh  
are aiming at Dien Bien Phu, but it  
still might by-pass it and invade  
northern Laos, taking the important  
French base of Xieng Khouang, and the  
royal capital of Luang Prabang.

A. Meanwhile, French report they  
have made first important con-  
tact with VM invasion force in  
*Thakets* Central Laos; claim to have  
routed Viet Minh troops in  
approximately battalion  
strength 30 miles north of  
Seno.

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1. Main enemy force of six battalions in Thakhek area probably no real threat to French at Savannakhet, now raised to 13 battalions by air-lift of five paratroop battalions from delta.
2. French hope shortly to eliminate the force and reopen surface communication to northern Laos.

IV. Present Viet Minh strategy apparently designed to force dispersal of French reserves.

A. Hurried dispatch by French of 5 battalions to Savannakhet as well as reinforcement of Dien Bien Phu proof it meeting with success.

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B. Dispersal of large part of French reserves leaves Viet Minh base areas near delta immune to attacks Navarre had planned.

V. On political side, Bao Dai recently ordered formation of a new cabinet, replacing that of Nguyen Van Tam.

A. Buu Loc, prince of imperial family and cousin of Bao Dai designated to form government but is encountering difficulties in getting support of important political groups.

Phan Huy Quat, present Defense Minister, will probably be asked to form government if Buu Loc fails.

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- B. Outgoing premier Tam had pro-French reputation and was appointed by Bao Dai year and a half ago when Bao Dai believed it essential to appoint man who could inspire French confidence.
- C. New premier will be man who can deal diplomatically with the French but one who, unlike all earlier premiers, is not French citizen and has no record of yielding to French pressure.
- D. Moreover, both candidates are from Annam, signifying shift toward genuinely national figure rather than front man from Cochinchina landowning and commercial interests as in past.

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E. Shift is phase of Bao Dai's strategy of setting up progressively more nationalistic governments but not so strongly nationalistic as to upset delicate French-Vietnamese relationship or to pose threat to Bao Dai's personal position.

F. Not likely any new government would seriously consider negotiations with Ho Chi Minh, although there are rumors Buu Loc is prepared to do so.

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